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The Widening Racial Scoring Gap on the SAT College Admissions Test

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# The Widening Racial Scoring Gap on the SAT College Admissions Test

*The racial scoring gap on the SAT test has now become wider than has been the case for the past two decades. Many believe that in the years to come the gap may grow smaller, not because blacks are catching up to whites in educational achievement, but rather because the test makers are adding a writing component to the test that may be manipulated to lessen racial differences and therefore reduce public criticisms of the test.*

FOR MANY DECADES The College Board has used a 200 to 800 scoring scale of performance for both the verbal and mathematical sections of the Scholastic Assessment Test. Now a writing component has been added to the SAT. From now on, students will receive three scores each ranging between 200 and 800. In the past a 1600 has been the best possible score on the composite SAT. Hereafter, the best composite score will be 2400. This means that this year's test results will be the last time JBHE will be able to compare black-white SAT scores based on the scoring system that has been used since racial differences in test results were first made public in 1976.

There are students of the SAT who believe that the new writing component actually will widen the racial scoring gap even further. They contend that this will happen because only 50 percent of black students who take the SAT have taken English composition classes while in high school. This compares to 67 percent for white test takers. Other commentators express the view that the new test will worsen the results for blacks on the theory that, for cultural reasons, blacks on the whole possess writing skills that are materially inferior to those of whites.

Nevertheless, there are analysts who say that the introduction of the writing component will reduce the racial scoring gap. The reason has to do with the probable biases of the test grader rather than the ability of the test taker. These experts maintain that the people who score the new writing section will be able to detect the race of the writer by the vocabulary and subject matter of the stu-

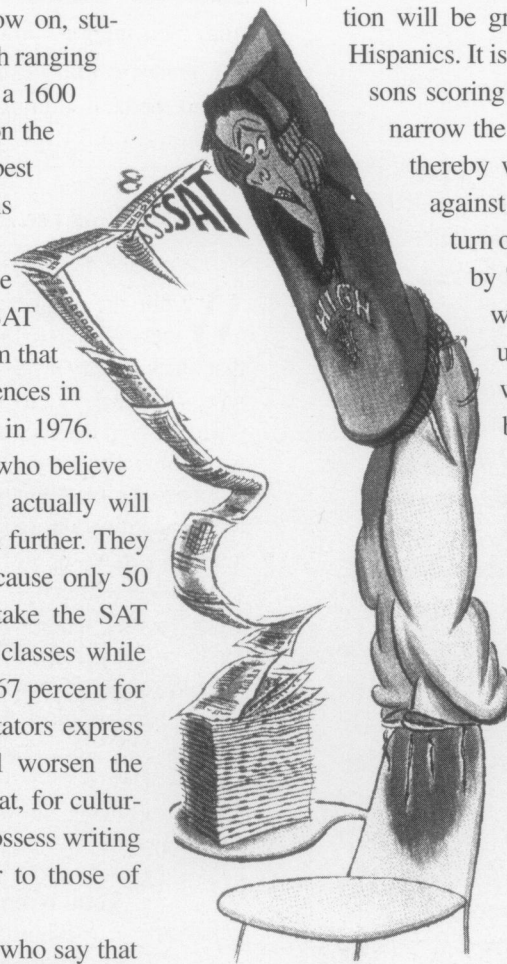
dent's essay. There is then a suspicion in some quarters that the scorers of the test, who are often able to determine the race of the test taker, may be inclined to "give a break" to black students. Therefore, it is suggested that the examination will be graded on a curve that benefits blacks and Hispanics. It is argued, too, that for political and social reasons scoring on the writing test may be manipulated to narrow the overall gap between whites and blacks and thereby will lessen criticism that the test is biased against minority students. These suspicions may turn out to be correct. Preliminary results released by The College Board on high school juniors who took the test this past spring show that under the new system the racial scoring gap will be the same or smaller than it was before.

So, as a result of the discontinuance of the old test, for the final time JBHE now analyzes SAT results using the familiar scoring system that has been in place for generations. And the news is not good. The average black score on the SAT did rise by seven points from the previous year. But the average white score improved by nine points. Thus, the black-white scoring gap has increased during the past year.

Over the past decade and a half, there has been only a slight improvement in black SAT scores. And over the past 17 years the racial gap between the scores of blacks and whites has actually increased.

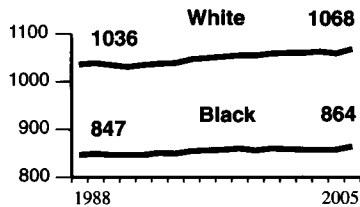
Here is the history.

In 1976 The College Board published an analysis of the racial differences in scores of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). At that time the average black score was about 240 points, or 20 percent, below the average white score.





**Over the Past 17 Years There Has Been a Slight Improvement in the Combined SAT Scores of Both Blacks and Whites. But the Black-White Scoring Gap Has Actually Increased.**



Source: The College Board.

Chart © The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education.

educational community predicted that in time the racial scoring gap would disappear altogether.

But after 1989 progress in closing the SAT gap stopped abruptly and later it began to open up. For the five-year period between 2000 and 2005 the gap between black and white scores on the SAT test expanded.

In 2005 the average black score on the combined math and verbal portions of the SAT test was 864. The mean white score on the combined math and verbal SAT was 1068, 17 percent higher.

In 1988 the combined mean score for blacks on both the math and verbal portions of the SAT was 847. By 2005 the

When The College Board next examined the racial scoring gap in the early 1980s, the gap had shrunk to 200 points. Black scores were then 17 percent lower than white scores. By 1988 the black-white SAT test scoring gap was down to 189 points. The trend was distinctly encouraging. Many specialists in the edu-

average black score had risen only 17 points, or about 1.4 percent, to 864.

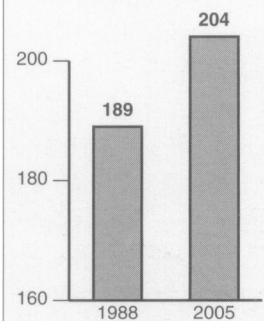
Despite the small overall improvement of black SAT scores over the past 17 years, *the gap between black and white scores has actually increased.* In 1988 the average combined score for whites of 1036 was 189 points higher than the average score for blacks. In 2005 the gap between the average white score and the average black score had grown to 204 points.

Not only are African-American scores on the SAT far below the scores of whites and Asian Americans, but they also trail the scores of every other major ethnic group in the United States including students of Puerto Rican and Mexican backgrounds. In fact, American Indian and Alaska Native students on average score more than 104 points higher than the average score of black students. On average, Asian American students score 227 points, or 19 percent higher, higher than African Americans.

### Blacks Losing Ground Compared to Whites

**Since 1988 the Racial SAT Scoring Gap Between Blacks and Whites Has Increased**

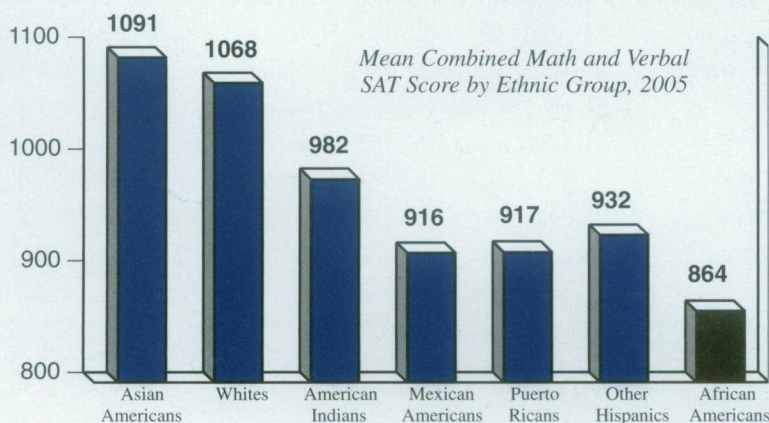
*Point Differential Between Mean Score of Whites and Mean Score of Blacks on the Combined Math and Verbal Sections of the SAT*



Source: The College Board.

Chart © The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education.

### The Mean Composite Scholastic Assessment Test Score of Blacks Continues to Lag Not Only the Mean Score of Whites But Also That of Every Other Major Ethnic Group in the United States



Source: The College Board.

Chart © The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education.

### Explaining the Black-White SAT Gap

There are a number of reasons that are being advanced to explain the continuing and growing black-white SAT scoring gap. Sharp differences in family incomes are a major factor. Always there has been a direct correlation between family income and SAT scores. For both blacks and whites, as income goes up, so do test scores. In 2005, 28 percent of all black SAT test takers were from families with annual incomes below \$20,000. Only 5 percent of white test takers were from families with incomes below \$20,000. At the other extreme, 7 percent of all black test takers were from families with incomes of more than \$100,000. The comparable figure for white test takers is 27 percent.

But there is a major flaw in the thesis that income differences explain the racial gap. Consider these three observable facts from The College Board's 2005 data on the SAT:

- Whites from families with incomes of less than \$10,000 had a mean SAT score of 993. This is 129 points higher than the national mean for *all* blacks.

- Whites from families with incomes below \$10,000 had a mean SAT test score that was 61 points higher than blacks whose families had incomes of between \$80,000 and \$100,000.

- Blacks from families with incomes of more than \$100,000 had a mean SAT score that was 85 points below the mean score for whites from all income levels, 139 points below the mean score of whites from families at the same income level, and 10 points below the average score of white students from families whose income was less than \$10,000.

### Other Explanations for the Racial Scoring Gap on the SAT

Clearly, one of the main factors in explaining the SAT racial gap is that black students almost across the board are not being adequately schooled to perform well on the SAT and similar tests. Public schools in many neighborhoods with large black populations are underfunded, inadequately staffed, and ill equipped to provide the same quality of secondary education that is offered in predominantly white suburban school districts.

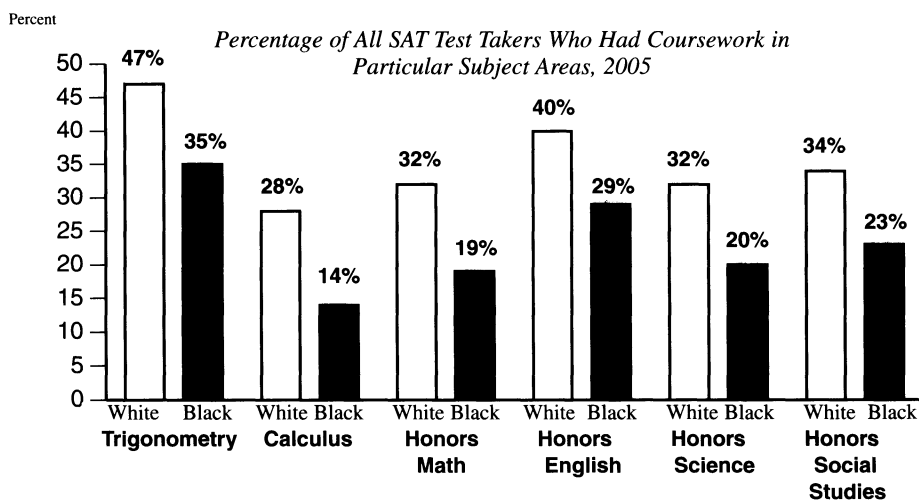
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*"White students from families with incomes below \$10,000 a year scored slightly higher on average than black students from families whose income was more than \$100,000 per year."*

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Data from The College Board shows that 57 percent of white students who took the SAT were ranked in the top 20 percent of their high school classes. This compares to 37 percent of black test takers. Some 45 percent of white stu-

### Here Is a Very Important Factor in Explaining the Persistent Racial Scoring Gap on the SAT: Due to a Lower Level of Participation in Advanced Subjects in High School, Black Students Are Not Prepared as Well as White Students to Perform Well on the SAT



dents who took the SAT report that their high school grade point average was in the A range. This compares to only 22 percent of black test takers. The mean high school grade point average for all white students who took the SAT was 3.37. For blacks the figures was 2.99. These figures alone explain a large portion of the racial scoring gap on the SAT.

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*"Some 28 percent of white test takers had taken calculus in high school. Only 14 percent of black students had taken calculus."*

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A major reason for the SAT racial gap appears to be the fact that black students who take the SAT have not followed the same academic track as white students. It is true that 97 percent of both blacks and whites who take the SAT have studied algebra in high school. But in higher level mathematics courses such as trigonometry and calculus, whites hold a large lead. In 2005, 47 percent of white SAT test takers had taken trigonometry in high school compared to 35 percent of black test takers. Some 28 percent of white test takers had taken calculus in high school. Only 14 percent of black students had taken calculus, one half as many as whites. Thirty-two percent of white SAT test takers had taken honors courses in mathematics compared to 19 percent of black SAT test takers.



Similar discrepancies appear in the level of instruction in English, the other major component of the SAT. Some 87 percent of white test takers had completed coursework in American literature compared to 75 percent of black test takers. For whites, 67 percent had taken high school courses in composition compared to 50 percent of blacks. Some 70 percent of whites and 59 percent of blacks had completed coursework in grammar. A full 40 percent of all white test takers had completed honors courses in English compared to 29 percent of black test takers.

Also, whites are far more likely than blacks to have taken honors courses in science and social studies. Given the huge differences in course study between black and white high school students, it comes as no surprise that white SAT scores are significantly higher than black SAT scores. Whites, who are more likely to attend high-quality schools, have simply achieved a greater mastery of the subject matter than have blacks.

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There are other reasons that contribute to the large scoring gap between blacks and whites on the SAT:

- In many cases black schoolchildren are taught by white teachers who have low opinions of the abilities of black kids from the moment they enter the classroom. These teachers immediately write off black students as academic inferiors and do not challenge them sufficiently to achieve the skills necessary to perform well on standardized tests.

- The late John Ogbu, professor of anthropology at Berkeley, believed that broad cultural attributes among blacks — such as parental style, commitment to learning, and work ethic — bear a heavy responsibility for the black-white educational gap. Ogbu wrote in his recent book, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*, that black students in the affluent homes of doctors and lawyers are looking at rappers in ghettos as their role models. Students talk the talk about what it takes to be a good student, Ogbu wrote, but few put forth the effort required to get good grades. This type of behavior is typical, Ogbu said, of racial minorities adapting to oppression and the lack of opportunity. Ogbu, much as

Bill Cosby has done recently, also placed the blame on black parents. He believed that many black parents are not offering sufficient guidance, do not spend enough time helping with homework, and do not pay adequate attention to their children's educational progress.

- Black students in predominantly white schools who study hard are often the subject of peer ridicule. They are accused of "acting white" by other blacks. This so-called ghetto chic in the form of peer pressure to shun academic pursuits undoubtedly has a dragging effect on average black SAT scores.



- Black students may be subject to what Stanford psychology professor Claude Steele calls "stereotype vulnerability." Steele contends that black students are aware of the fact that society expects them to perform poorly on standardized tests. This added pressure put upon black students to perform well in order to rebut the racial stereotype in fact makes it more difficult for them to perform well on these tests.

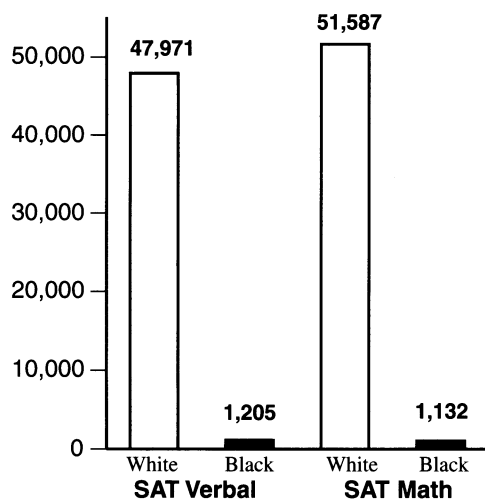
- Black students in some urban schools are taught an Afrocentric curriculum that may serve to increase black pride and foster an awareness of black culture, but this form of education pays little attention to the subject matters that are covered on the SAT.

- Even middle-class blacks tend to be brought up in basically segregated surroundings. They are not taught the pathways and modes of thinking that are embedded in white culture and reflected in standardized tests. Black families that urge their children to go to college are often first-generation college graduates who grew up in households without the systems that support first-rate academic achievement.

- School administrators and guidance counselors often believe that black students are less capable and less able to learn. They routinely track black students at an early age into vocational training or into a curriculum that is not college preparatory. Black students are rarely recommended for inclusion in gifted education, honors, or Advanced Placement programs. Once placed on the slow academic track, most black kids can never escape. By the time black students are juniors and seniors in high school, they are typically so far behind their white counterparts in the critical subject areas necessary to perform well on standardized tests that they have little hope of ever matching the scores of whites on the SAT.

**Almost No Blacks Have SAT Scores Equal to the Median Score of Whites at the Nation's Highest-Ranked Universities. In Fact, Whites Outnumber Blacks at the Highest-Scoring Levels by About 40 to 1.**

*Number of Blacks and Whites Scoring 700 or Above on the SAT, 2005*



Source: The College Board.

Chart © The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education.

**Almost No Blacks Among the Top Scorers on the Scholastic Assessment Test**

It is important to explain how the SAT racial scoring gap challenges affirmative action policies at the nation's high-est-ranked colleges and universities. Under the SAT scoring system, most non-minority students hoping to qualify for admission to any of the nation's 25 highest-ranked universities and 25 highest-ranked liberal arts colleges need to score at least 700 on *each* portion of the SAT.

*"African-American scores on the SAT trail the scores of every other major ethnic group in the United States."*

For admission to the very highest ranked, brand-name schools such as Princeton or MIT, applicants need scores of 750 to be considered for admission. Yet, as we shall see, only a minute percentage of black test takers score at these levels. Thus, if high-ranking colleges and universities were to abandon their policies of race-sensitive admissions, they will be choosing their first-year students from an applicant pool in which there will be practically no blacks.

Let's be more specific about the SAT racial gap among high-scoring applicants. In 2005, 153,132 African Americans took the SAT test. They made up 10.4 percent of all SAT test takers. But only 1,132 African-American college-bound students scored 700 or above on the math SAT and only 1,205 scored at least 700 on the verbal SAT. Nationally, more than 100,000 students of all races scored 700 or above on the math SAT and 78,025 students scored 700 or above on the verbal SAT. Thus, in this top-scoring category of all SAT test takers, blacks made up only 1.1 percent of the students scoring 700 or higher on the math test and only 1.5 percent of the students scoring 700 or higher on the verbal SAT.

*"Blacks make up only 1.1 percent of the students scoring 700 or higher on the math test and only 1.5 percent of the students scoring 700 or higher on the verbal SAT."*

If we eliminate Asians and other minorities from the statistics and compare just white and black students, we find that 5.8 percent of all white SAT test takers scored 700 or above on the verbal portion of the test. But only 0.79 percent of all black SAT test takers scored at this level. Therefore, whites were more than seven times as likely as blacks to score 700 or above on the verbal SAT. Overall, there are more than 39 times as many whites as blacks who scored at least 700 on the verbal SAT.

On the math SAT, only 0.7 percent of all black test takers scored at least 700 compared to 6.3 percent of all white test takers. Thus, whites were nine times as likely as blacks to score 700 or above on the math SAT. Overall, there were 45 times as many whites as blacks who scored 700 or above on the math SAT.

If we raise the top-scoring threshold to students scoring 750 or above on both the math and verbal SAT — a level equal to the mean score of students entering the nation's most selective colleges such as Harvard, Princeton, and CalTech — we find that in the entire country 244 blacks scored 750 or above on the math SAT and 363 black students scored 750 or above on the verbal portion of the test. Nationwide, 33,841 students scored at least 750 on the math test and 30,479 scored at least 750 on the verbal SAT. Therefore, black students made up 0.7 percent of the test takers who scored 750 or above on the math test and 1.2



percent of all test takers who scored 750 or above on the verbal section.

Once again, if we eliminate Asians and other minorities from the calculations and compare only blacks and whites, we find that 0.2 percent of all black test takers scored 750 or above on the verbal SAT compared to 2.2 percent of all white test takers. Thus, whites were 11 times as likely as blacks to score 750 or above on the verbal portion of the test. Overall, there were 49 times as many whites as blacks who scored at or above the 750 level.

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*"Only 0.7 percent of all black test takers scored at least 700 on the SAT math test compared to 6.3 percent of all white test takers."*

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On the math SAT, only 0.16 percent of all black test takers scored 750 or above compared to 1.8 percent of white test takers. Thus, whites were more than 11 times as likely as blacks to score 750 or above on the math SAT. Overall, there were more than 61 times as many whites as blacks who scored 750 or above on the math section of the SAT.

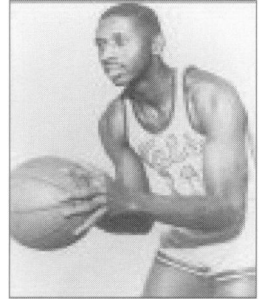
In a race-neutral competition for the approximately 50,000 places for first-year students at the nation's 25 top-ranked universities, high-scoring blacks would be buried by a huge mountain of high-scoring non-black students. Today, under prevailing affirmative action admissions policies, there are about 3,000 black first-year students matriculating at these 25 high-ranking universities, about 6 percent of all first-year students at these institutions. But if these schools operated under a strict race-neutral admissions policy where SAT scores were the most important qualifying yardstick, these universities could fill their freshman classes almost exclusively with students who score at the very top of the SAT scoring scale. As shown previously, black students make up at best between 1 and 2 percent of these high-scoring groups.

### Looking to the Future

In the *Grutter* case upholding affirmative action in college admissions, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's decision expressed the goal of eliminating affirmative action over the next 25 years. At the moment there is no evidence that substantial progress toward closing the test scoring gap will occur. Thus, the huge and growing gap in SAT scores, and particularly the scores at the highest levels, becomes one of the nation's most urgent problems. JBHE

### The Jackie Robinson of Basketball

When this year's National Basketball season began in early November, about three quarters of all players in the league were African Americans. But 55 years ago in 1950, three years after Jackie Robinson had racially integrated Major League baseball, all of the players in the NBA were white.



Then on October 31, 1950, Earl Lloyd of the Washington Capitols stepped onto the court in Rochester, New York, to become the first black player in NBA history. That night Lloyd scored six points and led the team in rebounds and assists. The few fans in attendance treated him cordially. The next day the *Rochester Times-Union* mentioned the historical event only in passing by writing, "After halftime, Bones McKinney, the Caps' new coach, injected big Earl Lloyd, Negro star of West Virginia State, into the lineup and he took most of the rebounds."

Lloyd grew up in rigidly segregated Alexandria, Virginia. After graduating from West Virginia State University, which at the time was an all-black institution, the 22-year-old basketball star was drafted in the ninth round by the Capitols and signed to a \$4,500 contract. A product of a segregated society, when Lloyd joined the Caps at age 22, he experienced his first significant interactions with whites. He kept to himself so as not to offend his teammates. In some cities he was unwelcome in the same hotels and restaurants as his teammates. The only player without a car, Lloyd, who lived in a black neighborhood of Washington, was picked up for practice every day by Hall of Famer Bill Sharman.

Lloyd remembers being subjected to racial slurs and spat on by basketball fans. Some fans told him to go back to Africa. Others jokingly asked to see his tail. Lloyd remembers feeling most unwelcome when playing in the cities of St. Louis, Fort Wayne, Indianapolis, and Baltimore.

After serving in the Army during the Korean War, Lloyd joined the Syracuse Nationals in 1952. That year he was prohibited by the team from going to the arena for an exhibition game in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Lloyd played for nine seasons and later served as a coach and a scout. In 2003 he was selected for induction into the Basketball Hall of Fame.

Now 77 years old, Lloyd lives in the small town of Crossville, Tennessee. He has come full circle. After having almost no contact with whites until he reached the NBA, the town where he now lives is 99.9 percent white.